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ABSTRACT

At the beginning of the school year, a teacher observed that most of her second grade students were reading below grade level. This was a great concern to her. As soon as she found out that she had to do a research paper, she focused on her students' reading levels. She came up with the idea of putting literacy materials in all the centers to help to develop her students' interest in reading. The teacher rearranged the classroom and clearly marked each of the five centers in the room. She selected the literacy materials for each center and placed them there. After a few weeks, she observed changes in the students' behavior. They would try to finish their assignments on time so that they could work with the materials in the centers. There was also a positive change in their class conduct also. The students became very protective of the materials in the centers and took on leadership roles. (Author/RS)

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Designing Learning Centers With Literacy Materials To Develop Literacy In Early Childhood.

by Veronica Myers

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CS 511 190

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Title: Designing Learning Centers With Literacy Materials To Develop Literacy In Early Childhood

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Abstract:

At the beginning of the school year, I observed that most of my second grade students were reading below grade level. This was a great concern to me. As soon as I found out that I had to do a research paper, I focused on my students' reading levels. I came up with the idea of putting literacy materials in all the centers to help to develop my students' interest in reading. I rearranged my classroom and clearly marked each of the five centers in my room. I selected the literacy materials for each center and place them there. After a few weeks I observed changes in my students behavior. They would try to finish their assignments on time so that they could work with the materials in the centers. There was also a positive change in their class conduct also. The students became very protective of the materials in the centers and took on leadership roles

Many students entering second grade demonstrate a lack of interest in reading. The lack of interest may be due to several factors including culture, socioeconomic background, ethnicity, school, family and experiences. It is very important for students to develop a likeness for reading at a very young age. Parents, grandparents and guardians play an integral in this development. Adults generally read to students at home. Therefore, books and other reading materials should be placed in areas in the home where children can have easy access to them. Young children need to understand that it is very important for them to become independent readers. After reviewing the relevant literature, I have been able to outline some of the reasons why young children are disinterested in reading and how I can change this disinterest to an interest in reading.

Parental Influence

According to Fitzsimmons (1998), learning to read is not a natural process for

preschoolers. Reading also does not develop incidentally but requires parents/caregivers intervention. Parents have to develop an awareness of sound structure and the ability to manipulate sounds into words (p. 2). The manipulations of sounds into words require bringing together a number of complex actions involving the eyes, brain, and the psychology of the mind. Fitzsimmons emphasizes that the beginning reading is the solid foundation on which all subsequent learning takes place. She goes on to state that all children need this foundation from home (p. 3).

Strickland and Morrow (2000) reinforced the concept that parents play a pivotal role in a child's early reading years. Research has shown that parents who use specific strategies during story telling resulted in significant gains in children's language ability, compared to parents who did not use these strategies (p. 50). Some of the ideas they listed that parents can use to improve their children's language ability are: 1) relate the book to your life; 2) praise your children; 3) point out 3words when you read; 4) choose books carefully; 5) wait for answers and; 6) have fun (p. 51).

I will reiterate that beginning reading is the foundation from which all subsequent learning takes place. Therefore, it is very important that all children get this foundation or their early childhood years in school will be difficult.

Children's parents, caregivers and early childhood educators play an important role in ensuring that children successfully progress in literacy development. Children's literacy efforts are best supported by adults' interactions with children through reading aloud and conversation and by children's social interaction with each other (McGee & Richgel, (1996). It is imperative that caregivers and educators in all settings are knowledgeable about emergent literacy and make a concerted effort to ensure that children experience

literacy- rich environments to support their development into conventional literacy (p. 32).

Literacy rich environments, both at home and school, are important in promoting literacy and preventing reading difficulties. In literacy-rich classrooms, teachers incorporate the characteristics of literacy-rich home environments, but they also use literacy routines; in addition, they have classroom designs that continue to encourage reading and writing (McGee & Richgel, 1996) through learning centers and engaged in learning activities (p. 42).

Vocabulary and Complex Sentence Structure

Pankey (2000) states that children learn by hearing it repeatedly. Children will encounter many strange new words when reading books as oppose to the spoken language. The reason is that the language in most of these story books is more complex than the everyday language spoken when adults (parents/teachers) and children are conversing. Therefore, children learn about vocabulary and complex sentence structure as they listen repeatedly to stories. Pankey purports that reading aloud to preschoolers "serves as an introduction to a new and more complex syntactic and grammatical forms" (p. 8). Children who hear more complex reading material learn more about the written language than those who hear simpler reading materials (p. 9). It can be deduced that parents, who read books to children, prepare them to understand the more complex sentence structure they will find in books at home.

Snow, Burns and Griffin (1999) list six ways in which reading difficulties can be prevented. They state that parents and caregivers should offer experiences and support that make language and literacy accomplishments possible (p. 2). The authors give the

following suggestions:

* spend time in one and one conversation with preschoolers;
* read books with children;
* provide reading materials;
* support dramatic play that incorporates literacy activities;
* demonstrate the use of literacy; and
* maintain a joyful atmosphere around literacy activities (Snow Burns & Griffin, 1999, p. 5)

Hopefully the majority of preschoolers will benefit from these simple "primary" preventions, thus ensuring that they will be ready for formal instruction.

Phases of Early Literacy Development

The terms beginning reading or early literacy development actually include several phases of learning through which children progress in different ways and tempos. It is an exciting and complex process that usually occurs between the ages of 5 through 8. As in most other areas of development, all children do not follow one clear sequential path in lock-step. Rather, individual children may take a variety of routes to reading mastery. Literacy learning is circular, learners may move forward in some areas and seem to step back as they consolidate understanding in others. Ultimately however, whatever the timetable or path, the goals are the same for all:

. to become fluent and efficient readers who can make sense of and convey meaning in written language.

. to become thinkers and communicators who are actively reviewing and analyzing

information.

. to enjoy; and,

. to feel successful as users of literacy for a variety of purposes.

Early Readers (first grade through second grade):

. know that reading needs to make sense

. are more attentive to print and know print conventions.

. understand that books have exact and unchanging messages carried by prints as well as pictures

. can identify most letters by name, and can use more letter sound knowledge to help figure out words

. know meaning of some punctuation, but may not use consistently reading

. can recognize, by sight, a small but growing store of words in different contexts

. use pictures, story patterns, context and memory of some words as well as some terms to make sense of print

The Learning First Action Plan for Reading

What will it take to ensure the reading success of every child?

. Effective new materials, tools, and strategies for teachers

. Extensive professional development to learn to use these strategies

. Additional staff to reduce class sizes for reading instruction and to provide tutoring

. for students who fall behind

. changes in school organization for more appropriate class groupings and effective

. use of special education, Title 1, and other supplementary resources.

Addressing the Literacy Needs of Emergent and Early Readers

In 1996, New Zealand researcher Marie Clay introduced the term *emergent literacy* to describe the behaviors seen in young children when they use books and writing materials to initiate reading and writing activities, even though the children cannot actually read and write in the conventional sense (Ramburg, 1998, p. 63). This literacy development is nourished by social interactions with caring adults and exposure to literacy materials, such as children's story books (Sulzby, 1991, p. 185). It proceeds along a continuum, and children acquire literacy skills in a variety of ways and at different ages.

Most children at the second grade level are transitional readers. They are able to read unknown text with more independence than early readers. Transitional readers use meaning, grammatical, and letters cues more fully. They recognize a large number of frequently used words on sight and use pictures in a limited way while reading (Clay, 1991, p. 163).

Youngster Developing An Interest In Reading

Blecher-Sass (1999) states that being able to read to oneself is a developmental achievement, but he goes to point out that it is being read to that inspires a love for reading. Therefore, a child who is able to read achieves this milestone because of the ground work that was laid by his or her parents. For example, if adults read to youngsters until they are old enough to read they will develop the desire to read for themselves (p. 78).

According to Blecher-Sass readers (teachers/parents) should make the book come alive when they read, for in so doing, students will be encouraged to think about and imagine the story. Blecher-Sass strongly suggest that teachers and parents should start

with a book that they enjoy and the child will sense the fondness for the story. In other words, a sense of enjoyment of reading should be conveyed to the students. Reading should be an experience where each student understands the message. For example, if the students enjoy short colorful stories, then these are the stories that should be read to them. The stories should have characters that the children are familiar with (p. 95).

Fisher, (1991, p. 1) believes that reading materials should be easily accessible for the children to select and use throughout the room. Thus, parents and teachers should display books and magazine selections so that the children are able to read the cover.

Since learning to read is not a natural process and is not developed incidentally, the methods for motivating these second graders must be enforced at all times. Teachers should be aware of the challenge students face due to the socio-demographic factors and provide the necessary opportunities for literacy development. Ultimately, the students' reading skills depend on the adults (parents/teachers) who are involved in their lives.

How I Changed My Classroom

Before I started my research paper, I had the five basic learning centers in my classroom, but most of the literacy materials were in the reading center. The math, writing, science and social studies centers were mainly in a little corner. I had mainly materials for the students to manipulate and very little reading materials. Once I got a full understanding of my research statement I changed my entire classroom. I created larger centers and I also made them more attractive by the type of literacy materials that I added in each area. The students' responses to the changes were very positive. I observed differences in my students very early. As a result of the changes, they became better readers.

Learning to read does not happen all at once when children enter school. It is a process that builds gradually from an early age as children acquire new understanding about reading as a form of communication. I have observed that most of the students in my class were not fluent readers. Once they got ready to read a book, regardless of where they were in the classroom, they would walk over to the library to get a book. From this observation, I have decided to put books in different areas of the classroom. I hope that students will get the idea that literacy materials can be placed in different areas. I have rearranged my classroom differently and literacy materials are placed in the different areas.

At first, my classroom only had a reading center. In the reading center, the students gather to read and listen to stories. The books are arranged on shelves by categories and placed in bins with their full covers showing. I have decided to change this setting. Reading materials are now in all the centers of the classroom.

During a portion of the day, the children's learning becomes more individualized as they work by themselves or with peers in the learning centers. Most of the learning center activities reflect or are an extension of the whole group instruction.

Designing a Center-Based Classroom.

Work centers are physical areas of the classroom designated for learning and practice with specific instructional goals. Early childhood centers include such areas as a Library Center, Writing Center, Science Center, Social Studies Center, Writing Center, and a Math Center. Classroom centers should be challenging and purposeful and the objective of each center activity should be targeted towards reaching classroom literacy goals.

Math Center

In the math center children are involved in a number of activities on a daily basis as they interact with their environment. It gives the children opportunities for problem solving as children interact with these hands on materials. There are a number of literacy materials in the math center such as games, puzzles, charts and books. These all refer in some ways to math. Most of the games are made in the classroom by the students and me.

The materials are changed constantly. They are related to the concepts that are being taught in the classroom. The center is designed to help children students grasp the concepts. Students are encouraged to go to the math area to work independently, with a partner or in a small group.

Reading Center

The reading center is designed for many reasons. A well designed reading center provides the children with opportunities for the following:

. to see written language

. to become familiar with "sense of story"

. to listen to stories on tape

. to developing book handling skills

. to become aware of details in illustrations

. to be exposed to a variety of literature

At first literacy materials were mainly in the reading center. The center now has less materials because some of the materials are in the other centers. It is still the center with the most literacy materials. However, the materials are grouped according to genres and levels. I have observed that the reading center is not used as much as the other centers. I think the main reason is, at the beginning of the school year the students only read in the reading center.

Science Center

This discipline of science lends itself beautifully to hands on experience for children. My science center encourages children to make observations, gather data, problem solve, and record findings, all of which lead to true discovery learning because of the literacy materials that I have provided.

I have selected books of different genres for the science area but most of the books are non-fiction. There is a lot of labeling in the science area. this happens because each week we try to do a new experiment. Therefore, the materials are labeled so that students can work with them and them put them back in their proper places after working with them.

Writing Center

Children learn to read and speak in stages. They also write in stages. Frequent writing experiences are required to allow these skills to emerge. My writing center is designed with literacy materials which provide opportunities for the following:

. experimentation with written language to create pictures, lists signs postcards, notes, etc.

. experience with writing stories/books

. exposure to a variety of writing instruments and different types of paper

Social Studies Center

In this center, my students are exposed to different types of literacy materials which help them to discover new information for themselves. The students enjoy working with maps and atlas as they are able to identify different countries and land formations.

Presently, I have a variety of reading materials in the centers. They are equally distributed in all of the centers.

Books: different genres, levels, paper backs and hard covers, cultural, books that captivate the students' interest, and books that are made in the classroom by my students and me.

Science Center

Sharks! Strange and Wonderful by Laurence Pringle

The Tiny Seed by Eric Carle

Red Leaf Yellow Leaf by Lois Ehlert

Leaves by Rena K. Kirkpatrick

Reading Center

Amber Brown by Paula Danzieger

Shark Lady by Ann McGovern

Anna, Grandpa and the Big Storm by Margot Thomas

Horrible Harry and the Purple People by Suzie Kline

The Little Red Hen by Harriet Ziefert

Math Center

Big or Little by Kathy Stinson

Bearobics by Vic Parker and Emily Bolam

One Hundred Is A Family by Pam Munoz Ryan

Social Studies

Oceanic Life by Weldon Owen

My World by McGraw Hill

Adventures In Time and Place by McGraw Hill

Writing Center

Literacy Activity Fund by Houghton Mifflin

A Time To Share by Denise Lewis Patrick

Rain, Rain by Marilyn Greco

Together by George Ella Lyon

It Looked Like Spilt Milk by Charles G. Shaw

Magazines and Newspapers: These are available for different reading levels and different areas of interest. These periodicals offer several benefits for my literacy program.

Games and Puzzles: Some of these are made by my students and me and some are bought. These too offer great opportunities for literacy development in my class.

Reasons For Designing My Classroom With Learning Centers

My classroom is designed in a way that children are free to learn in all areas. Putting literacy materials in all the basic areas help children to understand that reading materials can be placed in different areas and can be equally utilized. "Children's books offer endless opportunities to develop and use oral language. One major goal for language development through children's literature is to appreciate the creative and aesthetic use of language in books" (Wortham, 1998, p. 346). Therefore, it is very important to have different types of literacy materials throughout the classroom. As the children learn to read books, their language is developing and this will help in their conversations. "During the primary school years, children learn to read with increasing fluency, and most enjoy being read to. They also develop very individual reading habits and preferences" (Bronson, 1999, p. 117). Books written by children in my class make wonderful additions to the classroom book areas and have positive effect on self esteem and motivation.

I have tried to incorporate literacy materials in all the basic areas of the classroom in order to meet individual interests and to encourage my students to read. I have encouraged them to select books that will support what they are trying to learn. I want the children to have increased control of their learning. "At reading centers, children may read independently or with partners from books, magazines, or newspaper" (Burns, Roe, Ross, 1999, p. 58). They may also do so when books are placed in the other centers of the classroom. If my students are able to read independently at developmentally appropriate level, I will have more time to work with small groups, hold individual conferences and circulate to observe and offer support.

My classroom environment is supportive and free from the risks that inhibit honest

expressions. "Children should feel a sense of ownership in the reading they do by choosing the books they want to read and deciding where and how to read them, how to respond, and how their own related work is to be displayed or published" (Burn, Roe, Ross, 1999, p. 337). This is one of the main reasons why I have chosen to have reading materials in all the basic areas of my classroom. The books can also be easily reached by the students.

Books are very expensive but I try my best to select books that will captivate my students' interest. It is very important that I have literacy materials that the students are likely to read. "From the thousands of books published annually for children, teachers and media specialists must select good-quality literature that they think children will want to read" (Burn, Ross, Roe, 1999, p. 341). If the students have no interest in the books in the learning centers, it is likely that the books will not be used by them.

There are more paper back books in the centers because they are less expensive than hard cover books. The students make rules on how the books should be cared for. Children's magazines and newspapers are available for different reading levels and different areas of interests. "These periodicals are excellent classroom resources and offer several benefits for my reading program: (1) the material is current and relevant; (2) the range varies in level of difficulty and content presented; (3) several genres usually appear in a single issue; (4) their low cost makes them easily accessible; and (5) they are popular with reluctant readers" (Burns, Roe, Ross, 1999, p. 342). Presently, I am trying to encourage parents to have their children subscribe to one or two of their favorite periodicals which will enrich literacy development in our classroom.

I keep the children's cultures in mind as I select the literacy materials. I think that the materials should reflect their everyday lives. I have tried to arrange the materials in a

way so that one be able to tell something about the cultures of the children in my classroom just by looking at the classroom and its materials.

Observations and Conclusions

My children's attitude to learning have really changed since I have designed the classroom differently. They enjoy working in the areas. They will try to complete their class assignments in a timely manner so that they will go to the centers and participate in different activities. I see much more reading taking place in the classroom. The students are excited to bring books from home to add to the ones in the centers.

Visiting the school library is now a very exciting and enjoyable moment for my students. As soon as they select a book, they are trying to categorize it and say what center in their classroom it would be most suitable.

I have learned a lot from the way that I have decided to design my classroom. I was able to measure the outcomes immediately. I think that this was a success. For the rest of my teaching career I will continue to design my classrooms this way. I will also recommend this style to my colleagues.

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